



**Power and  
politics in  
Africa**

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# Going with the grain in African development?

Tim Kelsall\*

*Responding to the disappointing results of the Good Governance agenda, the Africa Power and Politics Programme is exploring the scope for approaches which attempt to 'work with the grain' of African societies. This paper explores what this might mean. It identifies a core set of beliefs and values – concerning power, accountability and social morality – that are widely observed across sub-Saharan Africa, have proven extremely durable and remain powerful drivers of behaviour. Generally speaking, Western institutions sit ill alongside these traditions, while the institutions that work well in solving collective action problems and providing public goods are those that harness the motivating forces of family, ethnicity or religion. This confirms the relevance of the question: how might development efforts be redirected so that they stop working against, and start to build upon, the extant notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability in the region?*

## 1 Introduction

For the past twenty years donors have been trying strenuously to transform the social fabric of African societies in the interests of development, efforts that have been organised under what is known as the Governance Agenda. Good Governance, wrote the World Bank in 1992, meant strengthening public sector management, promoting rules and institutions to provide a predictable and transparent framework for public and private business, and promoting accountability for economic and financial performance (World Bank, 1992: 3). Good governance also implied promoting a suite of essentially Western institutions: a separation of powers, free press, independent judiciary, pluralistic civil society, and respect for the rule of law, to which other voices added the idea of multi-party elections (Moore, 1993; World Bank, 1989: 61). Donors have been promoting Good Governance ever since. At its most ambitious the Governance Agenda attempts to reach right into the capillaries of African society, changing the way Africans practice and think about development and politics (Landell-Mills, 1992; Williams and Young, 1994; Young, 1996). The results, perhaps unsurprisingly, have been disappointing. Although most African countries have now emerged from the profound slump of the 1980s, none are recording levels of economic growth that are allowing them to make serious inroads into poverty. None of them appear to be taking off in the way that certain East Asian and South-East Asian countries have done in recent decades. Such observations give rise to the suspicion that the Governance Agenda does not provide sufficient answers to Africa's development conundrum. Further evidence comes from a variety of sources.

In recent years important new research on Asian economic success has shown that governments in this part of the world have rarely followed the kinds of policies proposed by Good Governance. They have intervened in the market, they have got prices wrong, they have engaged in rent-seeking and corruption, they have used clientelist politics, they have eschewed multi-party democracy, and so on (Khan and Sundaram, 2000). East Asian countries did not adopt Western ways of doing things wholesale; rather, they selected certain elements of the Western experience which they then combined with indigenous strengths, creating distinctive new models of development. The result has been dynamic growth that is undeniably reducing poverty. This should come as little surprise, since a glance at the historical record shows that Western states themselves developed step-wise from patrimonial and neo-patrimonial foundations – they did not arrive at good governance and prosperity overnight (Weber, 1980; Brewer, 1990; Bendix, 1978; Gerschenkron, 1962; Grindle, 2004;

Moore, 1966). Reinforcing these impressions, a global study by French researchers using data collected by French embassies has recently shown that Good Governance indicators are not the best predictors of economic performance. Instead, factors such as ‘coordination capacity’ and ‘strategic vision’ appear to be more important.<sup>1</sup> Observations such as these have led some analysts to talk about ‘good enough governance’ (Grindle, 2004).

In 2003, and partly in response to a frustrating experience with Governance, the UK’s Department for International Development began to pioneer an approach called ‘Drivers of Change’ in its country offices, based on the idea that ‘effective programmes must be grounded in an understanding of the economic, social and political factors that either drive or block change within a country’. DFID country offices commissioned over twenty studies into drivers of change, aimed at unveiling the ‘formal and informal rules, power structures, vested interests and incentives’ that inform state and development institutions (see Drivers of Change Public Information Note 2004, available at Governance and Social Development Resource Centre: <http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/drivers-of-change>). Each differed in its focus and methodology, but several studies came to the conclusion that the realities of power and culture in Africa posed formidable obstacles to the implementation of Good Governance, but also that the way power was exercised must change if more rapid development was to ensue.

Finally, Tony Blair’s much vaunted Commission for Africa also contained a chapter entitled ‘Through African Eyes’ stressing the importance and potential of African culture, and recognising the salience of patronage, patron-client relations, big-man culture and religion to development. It noted the success Somaliland has had building on local clan structures, concluding that: ‘The challenge is to harness the cultures of Africa to find such workable hybrids for the rest of the continent. The overall lesson is that outside prescriptions only succeed where they work with the grain of African ways of doing things’ (Africa, 2005: 35).<sup>2</sup>

Responding to these findings, the Department for International Development decided in 2007 to award £3.75 million to a five-year research programme to look more systematically at the nature of informal, neo-patrimonial power in Africa, and to answer the question of whether or not successful development policies that better fit with the grain of today’s – often corrupt realities – might be found. For the past year the Africa Power and Politics Programme has been devising methodologies and scoping case studies in an attempt to answer that question. But what are we looking for? What is the African grain, and where does it come from? What might development with the grain actually look like? This paper provides some evidence-based and conjectural answers to that question.

## **2 Politics and society in pre-colonial Africa**

What do we mean when we talk about the grain of society or the grain of a social fabric? The term implies that society has a particular pattern; that it flows in a certain direction; it evokes ideas of a society’s culture, traditions, or maybe *habitus*. But these are contested terms, so in this paper I will provisionally define the social grain slightly differently, and hopefully less controversially, as ‘patterns of thought, organisation, and accountability in Africa that have

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<sup>1</sup> See Meisel and Ould (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Another force pushing in this direction is the Paris Declaration, which encourages major donors to develop better partnerships with African governments, which by implication means working more with the grain of things. See Hyden (2008: 3).

been both widely distributed in space and durable across time'.<sup>3</sup> Thus defined, the key features of the social grain in Africa today flow from a history, rooted in an economy, that is thousands of years old.

Before the arrival of Europeans the African continent was home to a rich diversity of political formations,<sup>4</sup> out of which, with some caveats, we can discern a broad evolutionary pattern of increasing complexity and scale. The trend is from small bands of hunter-gatherers, to village-based agriculturalists, to more or less militarised chiefdoms and kingdoms, to empires based on production, slave-raiding, and trade. An illustration can be found in the 4000-year political development of Equatorial Africa, as described in Jan Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforests* (Vansina, 1990; for a continental overview, see Lonsdale, 1981). Vansina explains how bands of autochthonous hunter-gatherers in the forest zones of Central Africa were displaced or absorbed by migrating Bantu farmers. The latter brought with them a wet-season crop package and an ancestral tradition in which basic agricultural units or Houses were grouped into villages that loosely formed districts. Out of these a sense of ethnic identity gradually began to emerge, and in a context of population expansion, competition, diffusion, and conquest, some areas developed new ideologies and technologies that cemented new, more centralised political formations, such as the Kongo kingdom with a half million subjects.

While the evidence suggests that politics in band-organisations was relatively egalitarian and based on face-to-face accountability and participation,<sup>5</sup> the arrival of Houses and villages implied increased authority for senior 'big men' (Vansina, 1990). Further evolution (from about AD 1000) saw the emergence of ideas of 'legitimate succession' and the limitation of political competition to senior patri- or matrilineal, with junior lineages occupying subordinate roles. In Vansina's reconstruction the institution of primogeniture limited competition still further and permitted an increase in political stability and scale. Thus in larger formations of several lineages or more, a hereditary chieftaincy emerged, laying the foundations for the emergence of royal dynasties. In places where the resource base permitted and where the leadership was skilful enough, kingdoms grouping together several chiefdoms subsequently emerged (Vansina, 1990; for a textbook overview, see Schraeder, 2000). A kingdom implied some kind of a bureaucratic staff while in empires, the degree of political complexity increased still more, with an expanded bureaucratic staff exercising increasingly specialised functions.

It needs to be stressed that nowhere in Africa was this pattern of political evolution consistent or linear. Bands, chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires, rose and fell depending on their success in securing subsistence, wealth, and security for their members through hunting, production, warfare and trade (Lonsdale, 1981: 172; Vansina, 1990). In addition, political institutions were not always a product of 'organic' growth. They were often imported, as when refugees from the expansion of the Islamist empires in West Africa invaded the forest regions of Liberia and Sierra Leone, setting themselves up as 'chiefs' (Kup, 1962). In addition, the distribution of political and ritual functions differed from society to society, and the general trend toward hierarchy and power concentration was sometimes constrained by the existence of cross-cutting and counter-balancing institutions, as with the relations between chiefs and secret society officials in Sierra Leone, the Alaafin, Oyo Mesi and Ogboni in the Oyo Empire,

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<sup>3</sup> I realise that accountability may also be a contested concept. Very briefly, in my view, A is accountable to B if A is responsive to B's wishes, *and* if B can hold A *responsible* in the event of non-responsiveness. Holding A responsible implies inflicting some kind of loss (loss of face, loss of income, loss of popularity, loss of power etc) sufficient to alter A's behaviour. Accountability thus conceived can be formal or informal, bottom-up or top-down. All political systems contain a measure of accountability, although in those based on random, capricious or paranoid violence, or in ad hoc monetary arrangements, the amount is likely to be comparatively small.

<sup>4</sup> 'Mosaic', 'patchwork', and 'tapestry' are the metaphors often used to describe this diversity.

<sup>5</sup> Given the paucity of historical data, this has to be inferred from the contemporary ethnographic record. See for example Turnbull (1961).

or between lineage and age-based political association in parts of Tanzania (See for example Spear, 1997). In the forest regions of Gabon, communities bucked the centralizing trend of polities to their south by combining matrilinearity with strong decentralization (Vansina, 1990: 159).

From where did pre-colonial leaders derive their power and authority? For purposes of analysis we can divide the answer between economic and ideological spheres. Economically, big-men tended to control access to land and reproductive power: these were the main coordinates of what has come to be called a lineage mode of production, the different variants and remains of which can be found all over Africa today.<sup>6</sup> In the ancestral tradition identified by Vansina for example, women were essential to the production and reproduction of the political community. Big-men practised polygyny and married as many wives as they could, who were then used to attract young men to the household as consorts (Vansina, 1990).<sup>7</sup> Alternatively if a young man wanted to marry, acquire land, and start a family, he required the consent of the big-man. In patrilineal societies generally, men obtain land from their fathers, or else permission from a lineage elder or headman to clear new land. Over the course of his lifetime a man will have to transfer wealth in the form of labour and livestock to his wife's father.<sup>8</sup>

Another source of big men's authority was their organisation of what we might call public goods. For example elders might coordinate collective action for bush clearing (both for farming and to push back tsetse fly), harvesting during peak agricultural periods, terracing, and maintenance of irrigation furrows where these were used. In larger scale societies, some of these functions would be under the overall authority of the chief.<sup>9</sup> In the ancestral tradition of Equatorial Africa, the word for 'leader' is tellingly linked to the terms 'to divide' and 'to give away' (Vansina, 1990), and chiefs and kings would often amass substantial granaries for redistribution during peak labour periods or at times of food shortage, common in much of Africa. In the Shambaa kingdom of north-eastern Tanzania, the chief provided the ultimate refuge for families pushed to the margins of survival (Feierman, 1990, 53). In addition, where chiefs developed large herds of livestock, these could be placed with clients who would then owe loyalty to the chief. In pre-colonial Burundi and Rwanda, for example, cattle manure was an important foundation of Tutsi political domination.

Political authority also rested importantly on military domination. Talented hunters and warriors were able to protect their communities from wild animals and human attack, and to raid other communities for young men, women, and livestock. The king of Buganda was said to give a foreign war to his chiefs rather as a host gives a party (Lonsdale, 1986: 147). In a continent where labour was typically scarce, and populations often weakened by famine, many of Africa's largest and most powerful political formations were linked to slavery, both before and after their encounter with the Islamic and European world (Lonsdale, 1986: 148-149). For example, in South-West Equatorial Africa, the term for 'pawn' became conjoined with the term for 'prisoner-of-war', and with prisoners one saw the beginnings of slavery (Vansina, 1990). In the Shambaa kingdom, securing refuge with the chief also meant 'personal dependency on the chief, one which in some cases carried the threat the dependent would be sold to slave traders' (Feierman, 1990: 53). In this case, confraternal lineage groups built up funds of livestock so as to pay indemnities and forestall the pawning of their members to the chief. In Asante, perhaps the greatest sub-Saharan state, much of the heavy

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<sup>6</sup> Classic works of anthropology include Godelier and Meillasoux, and more recent ones in history (Kitching, 1980; Spear, 1997). Of course the lineage mode gave rise to a significant diversity of productive arrangements and land holding patterns, some of the political implications of which are explored in Boone (2003).

<sup>7</sup> The pattern still exists today in parts of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

<sup>8</sup> For a good discussion of the economics of women and cattle, see Kitching (1980).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Giblin (1990) and Koponen (1988)

labour and dirty work was done by slaves, whose compliance was secured not just by the threat of coercion, but by the remote possibility that they would one day earn their freedom (McCaskie, 1995). Likewise, the key officials of Western Nigeria's Oyo Empire were non-Yoruba slaves: 'Kings could use slave troops to police free communities; chiefs and elders could use slave labour to compete with the efforts of their followers and their sons' (Lonsdale, 1986: 149).<sup>10</sup> Even very recently, in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone, forced labour and sexual slavery have been key elements in the political economy of war, and raiding for slaves continues to flourish in parts of the Sudan.

These economic sources of power rested on the ideological buttresses of family and religion. To take the first, Vansina notes for the ancestral tradition that, 'Village communities were thought of as a single family whose father was the village headman, and the big men of each House were his brothers. The village was thus perceived as a House on a higher level' (Vansina, 1990: 81). Later on, the patriline provided a template for political governance, viz. 'a detailed hierarchy of age and generation. Smaller Houses in a village could be perceived as descendants from younger brothers. Closely allied villages were supposedly descendants of older or younger brothers. The former district, consisting of supposedly equal villages, now became a formal structure where every village retained its autonomy, yet occupied a precise position in a hierarchy as expressed by a common genealogy, where cognitive distinctions between senior and junior at each step corresponded to physical superiority or inferiority' (Vansina, 1990: 109). Even in a state as large as Asante, the social order was based on the state's underwriting of the principle of jural corporateness, the idea that the matrilineage and the uterine family were each in their own way 'a single, indivisible "jural person[s]"' (McCaskie, 1995: 86-89).

In addition, women and youths were taught that older men had the right to rule because of their virility, wisdom, and access to other-worldly power. African leaders 'mediate[d] the dichotomy between nature and culture' (Iliffe, 1978: 11) and '[k]ings claimed to help where it mattered, protecting not only the political but also the spiritual conditions of production' (Lonsdale, 1986: 146). Crucial to understanding this is pre-colonial Africans' religious belief in an invisible world of ancestors, warrior-heroes, nature spirits, and witches all of whom exercised tremendous power over the elements and the world of human affairs. Typically, elders claimed the esoteric and ritual knowledge to intercede with these supernatural beings and thereby bring fecundity, prosperity, and security to their followers, and to stave off misfortune, illness, and death. In chiefdoms, kingdoms, and empires, the ruler typically appropriated some of these claims to knowledge, often with the assistance of elaborate cosmologies and professional ritual specialists. According to Vansina, 'big men were successful because they had extraordinary supernatural powers, identical with and often superior to those of witches. A leader was always a focus of envy. A battery of charms helped him to repel the attacks of witches, and his own witchcraft killed competitors or subjects. His success was attributed to the favour of supernatural agencies, a favour won by furtive human sacrifices through witchcraft "at night"' (Vansina, 1990: 97).<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile rulers' instrumentalization of warfare was legitimated ideologically by means of an honour ethic (Iliffe, 2005).

But if African rulers had a variety of sources of power, their authority was also subject to constraint. At lower levels of political organisation, where lineage elders lacked concentrated means of coercion, power could only be exercised by way of a consultative tradition. Leaders who deviated too far from this would likely be brought back into line by face-to-face

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<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say 'The support of clients and juniors was in this way devalued; they became more amenable to control, less able to hold their seniors to account. Royal power became more secular, less bound by the ritualised restraints of the past moral economy of production' (ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> Here Vansina draws on an article by MacGaffey.

community pressure. Where authority was more centralised, the leader's power rested to a large extent on his ability to build up a significant granary or large herd and to wield the personal authority to mobilise collective action. If a chief was unpopular, commoners could often withhold tribute or refuse to follow his lead, thereby eroding the material foundation of his authority. In yet more hierarchical systems with specialised police and military staffs, kings could continue for some time to extract tribute from their subjects by force. But in most parts of Africa population remained thin, strangers were welcomed, and the locus of a leader's authority did not stretch very far. As Lonsdale observes, 'It was easier to repudiate a king's responsibility by turning one's back than to face him and hold him to account. And the economics of emigration were not too daunting' (Lonsdale, 1986: 146). Thus disgruntled subjects could quite easily abandon a chiefdom, set up on their own in uninhabited land, or else join the community of a neighbouring chief. Political obligation and identity were fairly mobile and fluid. All were incentives for a leader to rule wisely.<sup>12</sup>

These economic imperatives were reflected in ideological traditions of rule. Oaths of investiture, for example, often reflected a chief's responsibilities to his followers. On Mount Meru in Tanzania, the *mangi* or chief would sit on a stool before a large audience that included clan elders who would present him with gifts. One of the elders would face him, hold him by the shoulders and say, 'We have given you this throne, sit on it, and rule over us'. Chiefs could be removed if they failed to use their wisdom and power for the entire society (Puritt, 1970: 111). In the Shambaa kingdom, peasants said the chief had rights in all the wealth of their land, but they expected him to exercise those rights in moderation (Feierman, 1990: 48). Even the most ostensibly coercive polities usually contained checks and balances: for example, interviews with a late nineteenth Zulu king revealed that his freedom for manoeuvre was considerably constrained by chiefs and their subjects (Mamdani, 1996: 44-45).

In addition, although leaders based their claims to power on privileged access to a supernatural realm, they could never be guaranteed a complete monopoly. In the Shambaa kingdom, for example, 'The chiefs fought for power in an environment where many different individuals established claims to hold healing power: locust specialists, irrigation specialists, healers who treated epidemics, those who claimed special relationships with spirits at caves and trees, or with the ancestral spirits of a locally dominant lineage' (Feierman, 1990: 100). In this context, pretenders to royal power tried to show their strength by holding back the rain (Feierman, 1990: 78). Thus just as 'Africans drummed up support by proclaiming the fertility of their rule. Some of them were killed when they became senile or the next rains failed' (Lonsdale, 1986: 146). In addition, the forces of witchcraft were open to harness by disgruntled subjects, and big men lived in fear of poisoning or other forms of witchcraft attack, both of which inclined them to generosity in the exercise of power – 'One should never stand out. One should always share...witchcraft was an ideology of equality and cooperation' (Vansina, 1990: 96). It was thus in the interplay between responsiveness (based on providing economic, organisational, and ideological benefits to their followers) and responsibility (based on the possibility of dissent, desertion, or attack) that pre-colonial accountability could be found.

### **3 Accountability in contemporary Africa**

This pre-colonial past provided the foundation for ideas about power, accountability, morality, and society that remain terrifically powerful in Africa today. They have been explored in great detail in Michael Schatzberg's book, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa*,

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<sup>12</sup> In more constrained cases, particularly where the migration option was foreclosed, chiefs or kings might face open revolt or political challenge, as when slavery reached intolerable levels in late nineteenth century Shambaa, and Bondei peasants threw out their chief, reverting to lineage rule (Feierman, 1990: 94).



which draws evidence from Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zaire (DRC), Tanzania, and Kenya (Schatzberg, 2002). By means of a 'close interpretive reading' of newspapers and news magazines, presidential speeches and interviews, party manifestos and policy statements, memoirs, theology, philosophy, popular literature, as well as interviews and informal conversations in the field, Schatzberg argues that most studies of Africa are 'out of focus' with local political realities, and urges that '[u]nless we begin to take indigenous understandings of concepts and categories more seriously than we do currently, we shall continue to miss vital and living elements of politics in this part of the world' (Schatzberg, 2002: 37, 70).

The starting point to Schatzberg's new approach is a recognition of the frequency with which familial and paternal imagery are projected onto political affairs, leading him to conclude that Africans think about the relation between citizens and the state through the metaphor of an idealized extended family and its father. Familial metaphors, he claims, issue from an implicit cultural and cognitive template, which shapes African political thought and action. For Middle Africa, this cognitive template, or 'moral matrix', embeds a number of 'tacit understandings' about power, about the parameters of the political and about political causality. These are further associated with a set of 'general and imprecise understandings' about the rights and responsibilities of political office, about inclusion and exclusion from the political realm, and about how long a leader may legitimately remain in office. The moral matrix forms a 'politically subjacent arena', or set of 'pre-theoretical notions and assumptions' about politics. The ideas and actions that flow from it strike 'immediate and responsive chords' with the population; they are easily 'thinkable' and more likely to be considered politically legitimate.

The book discusses in tremendously rich detail the prevalence of metaphors of 'eating' in discussions of power, the role of spirituality in politics, the elision of the spheres of church and state, the idea of the indivisibility of power, and the role of the occult in beliefs about political causality. It also explains the idea that African leaders should be 'Father-Chiefs'. The President, for example, should be simultaneously like a loving father and a disciplinarian chief. He should be entitled to 'eat' well, but not when his children are suffering. Needless to say, this implies a moral discourse on corruption that is somewhat incongruent with public discourse on the subject in the West. Another defining feature of the moral matrix relates to generation and gender. Women may participate in the political system, but primarily as advisors behind the scenes. Elder men are entitled to power; but younger generations must be given their chance once matured.

Schatzberg demonstrates convincingly that a common cultural logic informs political experience in countries as outwardly diverse as Nigeria and Tanzania, while remaining sensitive to differences in volume and style. And here he is surely correct. While national political discourse in Tanzania is not heavily coloured by metaphors of paternity or eating – even if Julius Nyerere was both *Mwalimu* (Teacher) and *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation), my own local research revealed that these tropes permeate political talk at a local level. 'Do you want him [the MP] to eat that money only with his children? We are also his children' a constituent responded when asked what he thought about the MP's habit of ostentatiously handing out cash (Kelsall et al., 2005: 91-95).

The emphasis on 'Father-Family-Food' provides the ideological underpinning for the practices of clientelism and neo-patrimonialism that are so prevalent in Africa today. A good leader is not a first among equals, he is a patriarch, and he is expected to provide for his followers or family, making personal donations of food and other resources. The giving of patronage invokes a number of meanings that many Africans immediately recognise and understand; it is difficult to disapprove of a leader who nurtures his clients in this way.

Schatzberg also discusses the prevalence of witchcraft ideas in everyday political life, since political events are often thought to have other-worldly causes. A similar theme has been addressed by Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar in their book *Worlds of Power*, and in a subsequent article subtitled 'Taking African epistemologies seriously' (Ellis and ter Haar, 1998, 2004, 2007). They begin by drawing a contrast between European and African worldviews. Europe has experienced a long historical process of secularisation in which religion was first of all separated from the state and confined to a sphere of private belief, and in which occult forces became further removed from direct personal manipulation. By contrast, many Africans continue to believe that earthly power has its ultimate source in an invisible world, a world which can be privately influenced by means of spells, charms, rituals, and prayers: 'For most people in the world, including in Africa, "religion" refers to a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, which is home to spiritual beings that are deemed to have effective powers over the visible world ... In such a holistic perception of the world, it follows that people's social relations extend into the invisible sphere. In the same way as they try and maintain good relations with their relatives, neighbours and friends for their own benefit, individuals and communities invest in their relations with spiritual entities so as to enhance the quality of their lives' (Ellis and ter Haar, 2006: 353-4). Further, while most African countries recognise an official separation between religion and state, informally that separation is not regarded as legitimate. Consequently critiques of power are often couched in a religious idiom, and African politicians frequently court religious leaders and employ ritual specialists to buttress their rule. In a context such as this, rumours of political witchcraft, ritual murder and human sacrifice abound.

Ideas about patriarchal patronage and religious sources of power show strong continuities with the pre-colonial period, where the big-man – a household leader, chief, or king – manipulated the spiritual realm to bring health and prosperity to his dependents, organised some economic functions, distributed food in times of hunger, and protected his clients from violent attack; but it would be a mistake to think that African polities have not undergone change. The colonial period truncated the autonomous development of African states based on a process of competition, diffusion, imitation, and conquest, and caused indigenous ideas to be institutionalised in quite damaging ways.<sup>13</sup>

Let me explain. Colonial rule in most parts of Africa was based on a model of prefectural administration developed in Europe, in which the key relationship was between a provincially based European administrator and a network of African collaborators or 'big men': usually headmen or chiefs. Where indigenous societies lacked chiefs, they either invented them, or had them imposed (Iliffe, 1978; Ranger, 1983). As in the pre-colonial period, local big-men presided over communities of 'small boys', women and children who were their clients. However, the chiefs themselves were now clients of a colonial power 'founded on a neo-traditionalist ideology of patriarchal bureaucratic authoritarianism', which patronised them with salaries, advice in cash cropping, improved rights over labour and land, an increased ability to levy fines, together with a blind-eye, in many cases, to processes of extortion and corruption (Berman, 1998: 314). Local communities were increasingly drawn into national and transnational markets of cash cropping and natural resource extraction, a process in which the chief was often the key gatekeeper, lever, and beneficiary. Resource struggles dovetailed locally then with the politics of chieftancy, frequently expressed in debates about traditional custom and the proper disposition of relations between chiefs and commoners, big men and small boys, old and young, male and female. Paradoxically, this intense internal debate, the discursive material for what John Lonsdale has called 'moral ethnicity', was taking place within an ethnic unit which, because of the colonial state's obsession with control, codification, and standardisation, was becoming for external purposes much more rigidly constrained (Berman, 1998; Lonsdale, 1992, 1994).

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<sup>13</sup> This is one of the reasons why analyses of African politics based on Parsonian style pattern variables, invoking a timeless tradition, are so unsatisfying.

Externally, this unsettled ethnic community confronted a field of other ethnic communities, all in potential competition for an unprecedented pool of national state resources and favour. Local big men found it instrumental to access this pool in order to fulfil some of the 'morally ethnic' expectations of small boys, women, and children for resources and opportunities, and thus to prevail in local political struggles of lineage and clan. They consequently encouraged the creation of ethnic collective actors, able to compete in sometimes violent and amoral ways for recognition and resources on a national stage, a process that Lonsdale has referred to as 'political tribalism' (Lonsdale, 1994).

In the run up to independence political tribalism was transitorily eclipsed, but afterwards it reasserted itself with a vengeance in most countries (for overviews see Allen, 1995; Young, 1986). For the most part, the new states disregarded ethnic difference in their national constitutions and political institutions, and privileged the idea of the nation in official ideology, 'For the nation to live, the tribe must die', said Samora Machel, typifying nationalist leaders' ambition to work against the grain (cited in Berman 1998, 306). Today Africa's most successful leaders, even though they routinely denounce tribalism, 'sedulously attend to the maintenance of networks of patronage that are the basis of their power' (Berman, 1998: 306). Political tribalism and moral ethnicity thus link the deep politics of the peasantry to the high politics of the state, the interests of the village to relations in Cabinet, but primarily in an informal, off-stage sphere. Politics is a clandestine, materialistic and opportunistic struggle tied to 'the ability of the big-men of ethnic communities holding positions in the state to obtain for the regions and districts a significant share of the large-scale collective benefits of development in infrastructure projects of roads, schools, dispensaries, etc, as well as the more individual rewards apportioned through the discrete personal contacts of the back verandah' (Berman, 1998: 335).

Another difference between the present and the pre-colonial periods is an intensification of what J-F Bayart has called 'strategies of extraversion'; that is, the tendency of Africans to seek outside support in their internal struggles, even going so far as to render their own subjection and dependence into a deliberate strategy or mode of action, expressed in a variety of different ways, each of which draws an important pattern in the African grain (Bayart, 1993, 2000).<sup>14</sup> Looming large are practices of coercion, trickery, flight, and intermediation. To take the first, contact with the Western world introduced firearms to African leaders, which allowed them to be more coercive of their populations, and augmented their ability to acquire resources through war. Meanwhile the colonial state was founded on theatrical displays of violence or at least its threat, and the force of the lash, was used to propel labour in its corvees, caravans, plantations, and mines. Today, corporal punishment is a commonplace in African schools, armies, rebel groups, and vigilante movements; physical violence is freely used by the army and police, and sometimes dispensed personally by Presidents like Bokassa, Rawlings, or Moi. Coercion then, as in many other parts of the world, has to be seen as part of the grain (Bayart, 2000).

Next is trickery or *metis*, intimately linked in parts of Africa to the belief in a world of mystical doubles, folkloric tales of heroic tricksters, and a characteristic tactic used whenever parties in a position of weakness confront the strong (Bayart, 2000; see also Ferme, 2001; Mbembe, 1992, 1995, 2001). Trickery and deception informs the relations between peasants and the state, refugees and international aid workers, illegal migrants and border police, African leaders and multilateral donors, and reaches its acme in the Nigerian 419 scam; in fact in a plethora of means to defraud, trick, embezzle, and deceive. Closely linked to trickery, says Bayart, is flight, a strategy that, as we have seen, was relatively easy in precolonial Africa, and one the weak are more or less forced to adopt in confrontation with

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<sup>14</sup> Part of the reason has been the historic weakness of African leaders in relation to their own people. They have sought external support to improve their powers of domination.

the strong today. The most visible manifestation is the mass migrations of refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as more individualised modes of escapism and escape (Bayart, 2000).

Mediation, or intermediation, Bayart's next 'historical pattern of action', accounts for the way in which many Africans – clerks, schoolteachers, catechists, nurses, interpreters, traders – positioned themselves to take advantage of the colonial state. It has an older and contemporary reference point in the intermediation of leaders, prophets, and healers with the spirit world (See for example Anderson and Johnson, 1995; Murphy, 1981). It forms the cornerstone of clientelism, making it a very recognisable feature of the African grain (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2006: 98-99).

From our point of view, a developmental point of view, there are two main problems with the way in which Africa and the external world have interacted. The first is that there has frequently been an *externalisation of accountability*. The second is that there has been what I call a *parallelization* and *obscurantization* of political and economic activity, meaning that there exist parallel worlds of politics, with the real, informal world *obscured* behind a screen, and also to some extent *inverted*, as in a camera obscura. I will discuss each in turn. First, externalisation. We saw in an earlier section how access to externally procured firearms made African chiefs more patrimonial, delinking the means of coercion from the means of production, and making them better able to govern by violence rather than by satisfying the aspirations of a popular clientele (Lonsdale, 1986: 150). We saw that with the backing of the colonial state, chiefs became still less accountable to their subjects, a practice that has been carried into the postcolonial period, such that local officials, whether they be modern or traditional, often have the backing of powerful central authorities. External support means that local officials can afford, if they have the nerve, to be unpopular with their constituents for long periods of time. It weakens face-to-face accountability, and explains why some areas suffer local leaders who are corrupt and who contribute little by way of service to the local community.

Next, obscurantization. Bayart's emphasis on a world of doubles,<sup>15</sup> Berman's invocation of a backstage world of 'verandah politics', and writing by authors such as Ellis and ter Haar on secrecy, chime with Chabal and Daloz's thesis about the 'instrumentalization of disorder', or Blundo and Olivier de Sardan's, 'generalized informal functioning of the state' (Bayart, 2000; Berman and Lonsdale, 1992; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Ellis and ter Haar, 2004; Olivier de Sardan et al., 2006). The basic idea is that the formal apparatus of government, the 'air conditioner' or the 'shop-window' that is put on show for western dignitaries and donors is little more than a façade: 'double-speak reigns supreme', and the real business of politics and administration takes place in an altogether shadier sphere – a shadow state, in Will Reno's words (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2006: 7; Reno, 1995). In some of the more postmodern literature – Bayart, Chabal and Daloz are good examples – there appears almost to be a celebration of the idea that playing in the space created by cynically insincere rules brings significant benefits to African elites – via selective enforcement, rent-seeking opportunities, membership of the international community – and in some respects to common people too. There is a sort of admiration for the deception, trickery and fraud that are essential to this type of politics. And not only among academics: in conversations with my African informants, whether they be poor peasants or influential politicians, I often hear them laugh resignedly and admiringly about the details of political scams or fraud, even as they rue the fact that they are its ultimate victims.<sup>16</sup> In Benin, Niger and Senegal, where national borders have little

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<sup>15</sup> 'African political societies are duplicated between, on the one hand, a *pays legal*, a legal structure which is the focus of attention for multilateral donors and western states, and on the other hand, a *pays reel* where real power is wielded' (Bayart, 2000: 230).

<sup>16</sup> Mbembe (1992) gives a good account of the ambivalence in people's reactions to the obscenity of power.

historical legitimacy, ‘the fraudsters and smugglers generally enjoy the complicity of the local populations ... who applaud them every time they succeed in evading the customs officers’ (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2006: 215). Indeed, Arifari’s study of the customs sector in these three countries is a fascinating insight into the way in which Africa ‘works’. There is a general rejection of legality; the rules of the customs sector are there to be negotiated or broken; yet in spite of this the governments concerned manage to raise a significant amount of customs revenue with virtually no investment in the sector, customs officials and a host of informal auxiliaries get to ‘eat’, while civilians who can pay unofficial charges appear to clear their goods in reasonable, if not quick time.

But even if we agree with these authors that this disjuncture between the formal and informal spheres, this misfit between precolonial patterns and imported institutions has its own logic, has become organic, and is highly productive for certain people, it would be difficult to conclude that it is *developmental*.<sup>17</sup> Currently, the formal institutions of the state are working against the grain of society’s more dynamic forces. At best, this may hold unmanageable centrifuges in check, as when electoral rules forbidding ethnic campaigning mitigate a tendency to ethnic violence; but more normally, they put a brake on society’s energies, they channel politics and administration into a realm of opacity and unpredictability, they make trust impossible to attain.<sup>18</sup>

Another constitutive effect of obscurantization is lack of transparency, the negative effects of which we see everywhere. If people do not understand or do not know how much money local councils, local cooperative societies, local schools and the like have at their disposal, or where the money goes, it is difficult for them to evaluate their performance and hold their officials to account. Politicians can secrete away enormous resources, but with some political largesse and well-chosen words, they can paint themselves as decent leaders to local populations who do not know otherwise (for the discourse of munificence see Haugerud, 1995; Kelsall et al., 2005: 44). They can divert resources from their official purposes while ordinary people can remain ignorant of the damaging effects.

There are currently numerous initiatives emanating from different quarters to try and make African governments more transparent. The trouble is that these initiatives are working against the grain, which means that they are likely to have only limited success. The reality is that these practices must remain opaque because they are both necessary and illegal. They are necessary because politicians need for reasons of traditional legitimacy to deliver resources through personalised clientelistic networks to local communities. And they are illegal because they contravene an imported ideological, legal and governmental system founded on a strong separation between public and private that has never existed in Africa (for a groundbreaking expression of the phenomenon, see Ekeh, 1975). The lack of fit between local political culture and imported political institutions creates incentives for rule-breaking and opportunities for self-enrichment.

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<sup>17</sup> Take the case of customs in the aforementioned three countries: because of the perversely Byzantine structure of predation on which it rests, it is a rather inefficient system for supplying public goods. If African governments do not really care about the nature or amounts of goods trafficking in their countries, then surely a more efficient use of human and financial resources would be to levy affordable flat rate or at least simplified fees on every import transaction. This is not to say that such a course would be *politically* feasible. To be so, it would need to approximately fit the existing political grain.

<sup>18</sup> A pessimistic reading is that this misfit, this instrumentalization of disorder and subterfuge, is itself the grain of African society, so that *going with the grain* means learning to live with the idea of productive misunderstandings, of scamming. Without getting too constrained by the details of what is after all a metaphor, I would prefer to think that this is actually a particular shape that the grain has taken postcolonially, a sort of unattractive kink in a much longer pattern.

Other problems arise, as with political tribalism, whenever different local political identities are in competition for a wider pool of resources. For example, in his study of the Victoria Federation of Cooperative Unions in Tanzania, S.E. Migot-Adholla showed how cooperative officials got away with corrupt practice, since the Federation was seen in a 'distant' and cloudy perspective and its assets as 'a reservoir of benefits for which many societies and unions were in competition' (Migot-Adholla, 1975: 239).

#### **4 Going with the grain of African governance and development**

If African development has been constrained by the fact that institutions push against its political grain, what might development with the grain look like? The question is clear: how to build on extant notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability to channel energies into activities that are developmental instead of predatory? But if the question is clear, the answer is less so, since most states in Africa grapple with a broadly similar imported institutional baggage, and since institutions that go with the grain have tended to remain below the radar of development researchers. However, there are a number of institutions in which accountability is reasonably strong that are well-known to researchers, and which can provide clues as to the shape of development with the grain.

The most robust forms of accountability and public goods provision in Africa today can be found at the local level. The locus for these activities is often the extended African family.<sup>19</sup> People in Africa generally place a high value on celebrating basic life-cycle rituals, such as births, initiations, marriages, and deaths. From my own observations, it is striking how much more willing Africans are to contribute to these celebrations than they are to institutions such as NGOs or the state. In rural areas marriages and funerals in particular are often organised by a small committee that collects contributions, and extended family members frequently entrust the organisers with significant resources, which are typically well-spent. Extended families often also provide mutual support to one another for purposes of education, in times of illness, and in cases of bereavement. Successful Africans often find themselves paying the school fees of nephews, nieces, and second cousins for example. In Tanzania, salaried people in urban areas often provide accommodation for long periods for poorer relatives migrating from rural areas. In AIDS-afflicted Malawi, it is common to find that uncles and aunts are raising their orphaned nephews and nieces.

Meanwhile conflicts in the extended family, over land, marriage, personal injury, inheritance and so forth, are typically resolved not by state agencies, but by immediate or extended family elders. In many parts of Africa lineage elders spend long hours shuttling from conflict to conflict and resolving problems: it is a form of obligation but also a form of work, compensated usually only by the status it confers or the small gratuities provided. Indeed, the extended family in Africa arguably remains the primary locus of political obligation and moral imperative. Within this sphere people feel obliged to act honestly and fairly – even if they often find this challenging – because of the shared experience of growing up together, the ideology of ancestral solidarity, the threat of social ostracism, and sometimes also by the supernatural sanctions that attach to offices such as clan eldership. For example, in the area of Tanzania with which I am most familiar, clan elders take an oath of office believed able to kill them if they abuse their positions. The oath has some affinities with a local form of ritual cursing called 'breaking the pot', which is used locally to hold people to account for misdemeanours as diverse as adultery, theft, and assault (Kelsall, 2003).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The scope and nature of this extension varies from place to place.

<sup>20</sup> See also this recent report from Kenya: *Kenyans hand back 'cursed' loot*. 'The threat of witchcraft has scared looters into returning goods they stole during unrest which followed last month's disputed Kenyan elections. TV stations broadcast pictures of people returning to places they robbed in the coastal city of Mombasa carrying beds, sofas and other items. A police commander

Beyond the family, the most effective development institutions tend to have a religious foundation. Churches, mosques, Muslim brotherhoods, secret societies. As with the extended family, Africans tend to be much more willing to support these organisations with contributions of labour and money than they are secular NGOs or the state, meaning that unlike the latter, religious organisations in Africa are often self-sustaining. Africans are also more likely to treat their demands as moral imperatives. Thus many of the most successful Community Based Organisations take a religious inspiration, and churches, using a combination of local and external resources are heavily involved in local education, water, and health provision in many parts of the continent. Islamic NGOs are sometimes providing religious education with technical training, including in computing and business studies (Ellis and ter Haar, 2006).<sup>21</sup> With few exceptions, the quality of the services provided, especially by the established Christian churches, tends to surpass those provided by the state. The reason, we can conjecture, must be the historical embeddedness of the church in local areas, combined with the deeply religious worldview of church officials and their congregations, entailing, as its corollary, belief in the potential sanctions of a higher power.

Exceeding the bounds of the family, but still at a face-to-face level, some small scale development activities tend to be highly effective and accountable. For example, revolving loan associations, usually run by small groups of women, and increasingly being supported by donors, appear to be something of a success story. In a previous era, agricultural cooperative societies achieved a high degree of success, especially in Tanzania and Uganda, and there are some signs, at least in the former, that they are enjoying a revival.<sup>22</sup> In addition, local communities often solve a variety of collective action problems such as furrow maintenance, terracing, path-cleaning, bush-clearing, community policing and so on with varying degrees of success, often under the direction of a local leader enjoying electoral or hereditary legitimacy, such as a village chairman or chief (or some kind of hybrid, like a Malawian 'town-chief'). Since most people understand the need for these activities, the question is a fairly straightforward one of preventing free-riders, and a central authority is usually delegated the task of coercing them into compliance. Many successful grassroots NGOs in Africa build on this kind of tradition using 'participatory methodologies'. They first of all canvass support for a particular development intervention – building irrigation furrows, maintaining a well – then elect a committee to oversee the intervention, and then mobilise labour.<sup>23</sup>

Problems tend to arise when this central authority lacks traditional legitimacy, or, as we saw earlier, when accountability is externalised: if local officials are protected by a higher power, such as the state, or maybe because of perceived expertise in witchcraft. All of these can render a leader unaccountable and erode collective action from below.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately an indigenous capacity for self-organisation is often quite rapidly revived even in countries where such initiatives were comprehensively crushed by the state, as in Somaliland where clan elders are once again managing land and natural resources with some success.

The vibrancy of face-to-face community based organisations in Africa was the inspiration for a celebratory literature on associational life at the end of the 1990s (see for example Bratton and Rothchild, 1992, and Naomi Chazan's chapter in Diamond, 1988). Authors saw these

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confirmed the reports and said the rumours of witchcraft had made his job "easy". BBC. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7176673.stm>

<sup>21</sup> See also the literature coming out of the Religions and Development Research Programme at University of Birmingham: <http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=1>

<sup>22</sup> APPP Tanzania Scoping Exercise, February-March 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Manor (2008: 10-11) provides an overview for Asia and Africa.

<sup>24</sup> On fieldwork trips in Tanzania I have heard of several cases where ordinary villagers are said to be unable to remove corrupt and unpopular village leaders because they believe them to be witches.

little organisations as evidence for a Tocquevillean civil society that would be the foundation for a liberal developmental state. Various authors encouraged donors to support these organisations. Where they were based on particularistic kinship or ethnicity, they recommended that they should be steered in the direction of openness and universality (see for example Hyden, 1997). However, from a developmental point of view this was arguably bad advice, since it had the potential to remove the very features that made these organisations strong.<sup>25</sup> In a fascinating case study of this trend Jim Igoe details how a pastoralist NGO in northern Tanzania, built from the grassroots on patron-client ties with elders adopted a written constitution and formal procedures at the behest of donors. One effect was to distance the organisation's educated leadership from its grassroots base, totally undermining its effectiveness (Igoe, 1999). I remember studying an NGO village goats project in the late 1990s, also in Tanzania. Moderately poor members of the village were given pregnant goats. When the goat gave birth to its litter, the owner was supposed to pass on a kid to another poor member of the community. In fact, what tended to happen was that people passed the goats on to their relatives. Some of these relatives fitted the income bracket targeted by the NGO, but some were either too rich or too poor. At the time, I saw this as a betrayal of the project's principles; but the project remained reasonably successful, perhaps because rather than in spite of the fact that it traced a familial grain.

Above the very local level one often finds institutions that span local and national arenas, and which are held together again by face-to-face accountability and ethnic solidarity. Take for instance home town associations, or district development trusts. In places like Cameroon and Tanzania, these associations often originated to assist rural migrants in fast-growing towns, providing a venue for socialisation and mutual assistance, such as paying for funeral and medical expenses. Many of these associations are now transnational, linking rural areas with diasporas in cities throughout Africa and the West. As well as traditional funeral assistance, they increasingly promote development projects like school assistance and road building, and in some areas, for example Hai District in Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania, they have formed a parallel and partly overlapping development administration with the government.<sup>26</sup> Typically, individuals appear to invest more commitment and resources in these institutions than they do in bureaucratic organisations like the state. They are motivated by personal social relations and ethnic pride (Mercer and Page, forthcoming).<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that larger-scale local development tasks in Africa, like road or school building, are rarely undertaken on the basis of local initiative alone – the resources required appear too great. In most cases, local people can be persuaded to contribute time, labour, and sometimes money, however, if an external donor – an NGO or the state – can be attracted with additional funds. For example, a local community will construct a school and then, through the intercession of the local MP, the state will provide teachers and books. In Kenya this practice was called *harambee*, and local constituencies often evaluated their MP in terms of the extent to which he secured funds to support their local initiatives, institutionalising a kind of bottom-up client-patron accountability.<sup>28</sup> Today, MPs in Kenya and also in Malawi

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<sup>25</sup> Critiquing the civil society literature in 1992, René Lemarchand asked incredulously 'If the institutionalisation of solidarity reciprocities is a key requirement of governance, the question arises as to what categories can qualify as partners in the process of reciprocation: ethno-regional aggregates? Witches and sorcerers? Spirit-mediums? Youth groups? Churches?' (Lemarchand, 1992: 191). The answer to all of these, we are now beginning to see, should perhaps have been 'Yes'.

<sup>26</sup> Tanzania Scoping Exercise, Feb-March 2008. See also Kiondo (1995).

<sup>27</sup> Also based on mutual support and solidarity are ethnic revival associations such as the *Mungiki* in Kenya, the Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria, or the Young Pioneers Movement in Ivory Coast. However, these organisations, aimed at influencing or capturing political power, tend to be less developmental and more incendiary.

<sup>28</sup> For an account of the perversion of *harambee* politics under President Moi, see Kanyinga (1994). For account of an earlier period, see for example, Cooksey et al. (1994).



have been given constituency development funds, with some success.<sup>29</sup> In Tanzania, this *harambee* style development has been rolled out, although in a more centrally driven way, in the recent programme to achieve universal primary education under the PRSP. Home town associations also, will often attempt to form links with nationally successful kinsmen in the world of business or politics, including usually the MP. These national big-men often patronise the associations in the expectation of gaining valuable local clients. Notice the constant variables here: face-to-face accountability, big-men, clientelism, political largesse.<sup>30</sup>

In some countries the role of local big-men has been consciously nurtured. For example, chiefs continue to fulfil basic development functions in different parts of the continent. They have even been revived in some places where they were formerly abolished, like Mozambique (Buur and Kyed, 2005). Some national parliaments also contain houses for chiefs, which tend to have a largely consultative role. In Botswana, one of the continent's few success stories, local administration was built upon a traditional foundation – the *kgotla*. In addition, the country's first President, Seretse Khama, consciously manipulated the symbols of a traditional kingship (Gulbrandsen, 1995).<sup>31</sup> Recently, there has been no shortage of progressive academics queuing up to critique chiefs, denigrating them as agents of 'decentralized despotism', and it is true that chiefs have often played a predatory role (Grischow, 2008; Mamdani, 1996). However, even in places where they take some of the blame for the breakdown of an entire social order, as in Sierra Leone, popular consultations have shown that people want more accountable chiefs rather than no chiefs at all (on this debate, compare Fanthorpe, 2006; Richards, 2005). The idea of a strong, generous, patriarchal and disciplinarian leader – as long as he is fair – retains widespread support.

In most parts of the continent traditional leaders are not elected by what we would normally call 'democratic means'. Among the Maasai, community elders closely watch their male children as they mature, looking for the qualities of a good leader, or *Laigwenak*. The anointed child is not told he has been chosen until after the previous *Laigwenak* has died, and then he has no choice but to shoulder the leadership role, which is regarded as a heavy burden. In other African countries, especially where the chieftancy has become part of the local administration, chiefs are elected by a limited franchise of community elders, for a life term. The idea that modern leaders should enjoy such long terms is doubtless undesirable and unacceptable in contemporary Africa, but the idea of a limited, or indirect franchise, may be less so. The ruling party in Tanzania uses such a franchise for its internal elections, and although these by no means eradicate money-sapping clientelism, in fact they are built on it, the party nevertheless manages to elect reasonably competent leaders and achieve peaceful successions of power.

Political leadership in Africa generally figures in the literature as a problem. Much has been written about the phenomenon of personal rule, patron-clientelism, the tendency for laws and official procedures to be routinely broken (for examples of a huge literature, see Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Joseph, 1987; Médard, 1982). This indeed is the essence of neo-patrimonial governance. The rules are merely a screen, or else they are cynically used to create opportunities for rent-seeking. The good governance agenda has been intimately concerned with streamlining and strengthening rules, and trying to make African bureaucracies less personalistic and more rule-bound. At the same time donors have funded multi-party elections, strengthened national parliaments and opposition parties. Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that most African presidents, ministers, and big-men, continue to intervene in the day to day affairs of their administrations, overriding the rules when it suits them, and

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<sup>29</sup> Though this is decidedly mixed.

<sup>30</sup> For a comparative discussion of the structures that link local and central levels in India, and their developmental effects, see Manor (2008: 8-11).

<sup>31</sup> For an account of the limitations of the Ugandan experiment with traditional authorities, see Englebert (2002)

manipulating or rigging the results of elections if they can. Many commentators seemed shocked when Mwai Kibaki rigged the 2007 election, but he was merely upholding a time-tested Kenyan tradition, in which no incumbent has ever surrendered power to the opposition. Indeed, the cases where an incumbent in Africa has been beaten at the polls can be counted almost on the fingers of one hand. In one sense this is a potential strength of the African mode of governance. Five-year terms of office represent a narrow window in which to make sensible long-term development policy. Moreover rules can be cumbersome, inflexible, and time-consuming, especially where administrations are weak and civil servants lack the capacity to follow complicated procedure effectively. The rule of law can actually be a hindrance to effective administration, for example when it comes to fighting corruption. In present day Rwanda President Kagame has not allowed the rule of law to deter him from throwing suspected corrupt officials in jail. Permanent secretaries apparently joke, 'Have you got your pink [gaol] uniform ready?'<sup>32</sup> Thus neo-patrimonialism might actually be an aid to development so long as one has a publicly interested leader with a sound development vision and strategies for putting it into effect. The problems arise when a leader becomes selfish, or loses his way. As we know, neo-patrimonialism can then be an extremely destructive force. The question for developers wanting to work with the grain of African society, then, is not how to transform neo-patrimonialism, since that is an impossible or at least very long term project, but rather how to restrain or mitigate its worst effects; how to ensure that despotism is always enlightened, in other words.<sup>33</sup>

In some countries the emphasis on traditional leadership has been accompanied by a newfound interest in the ritual dimensions of power. As noted above, most African societies contain strong traditions of oathing and cursing, powerful supernatural instruments that are used, with some success, to hold people to account. In Rwanda, for instance, civil servants now take an oath called the *imihigo* which derives from an oath that warriors swore to the king in the pre-colonial Rwandan kingdom.<sup>34</sup> In Tanzania, following the recent resignation of the Cabinet after a corruption scandal, the new Prime Minister took a Maasai 'anti-corruption' oath.<sup>35</sup> Whatever one thinks about the supernatural efficacy of these oaths, it is clear that they can have important symbolic effects. When combined with other more prosaic instruments of accountability, such as public praise or shaming (in Rwanda public servants are rewarded for performance in front of a football stadium of people), they may be powerful props to accountability. And in places where governance reforms go against the grain of public expectations, ritual accompaniments might be used to smooth them back into line. For example, recent reforms in some countries have led to tighter financial control of local councils and increased resources flowing through programmed budget support. One effect has been that local politicians – councillors and MPs – now have fewer resources and projects to personally distribute, a trend that goes against the expectations of their constituents. We can speculate that the latter's disappointment might be mollified, however, if councils receiving clean audits were provided bonuses for the express purpose of holding feasts and celebrations,

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<sup>32</sup> Fred Golooba-Mutebi and David Booth, 'Notes on scoping interviews in Rwanda and Uganda, December 2007', Africa Power and Politics Programme, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Hyden has figured this slightly differently as, 'how a self-binding element can be institutionalized' (2008: 35), while Manor notes that leaders in places like Brazil, Uganda, and Mozambique have sometimes assertively intervened in their political systems in order to make space for ordinary people's activism (2008: 13-14). An interesting question is 'Why'?

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Pinda takes traditional oath against graft*. 'Prime Minister Mizengo Pinda declared that he would never involve himself in corruption, saying it was sinful and unlawful act that should be condemned by all. While addressing a rally in Mpanda yesterday, Pinda invoked a Masai traditional oath, calling for ancestral wrath if he ever takes bribe. He promised to stick to ethical behaviour, even if it means letting his parents continue living in ordinary huts. Pinda also called upon local councils to review their contracts with companies, many of which he described as 'mini-Richmonds'. People also have to be vigilant in exposing such shoddy and shady deals, Pinda challenged.' British High Commission Kiswahili Press Summary (Majira, Nipashe, HabariLeo)

something that might help institutionalise the desirability of clean audits in local eyes.<sup>36</sup> Can ritual, backed by informal pressure, even play a role in keeping African presidents responsive to the public interest?

Generally speaking, the rules and protocols of Western institutions sit ill with African traditions. Take, at a lower level, the courts. Many studies have shown that English common law courts in Anglophone Africa have never been popular, in part because the language, strict adversarial protocol and the winner-takes-all nature of the judgements are foreign to African traditions, which tend to be more inquisitive, mediatory, and restorative (see for example Ferme, 1998; Gibbs, 1963; Gluckman, 1964; Moore, 1969, 1992; Gulliver, 1963; Davidheiser, 2006). The latter are better represented in local moots, informal chieftom courts, and customary courts, which, while retaining their own problems, tend nevertheless to be more popular and accessible. As a solution to this some African court systems have been deliberately informalised, as with land courts in Tanzania. In Ghana, an attempt to blend the two approaches seems to have been most successful: state-supported courts or dispute settlement institutions which offer some of the elements of 'Western' style justice (impartial adjudication, due process, balance, certainty and enforceability) with informality and accessibility, but *without* the trappings of 'traditional' chieftaincy and customary law.<sup>37</sup> Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms, inspired in the West partly by African examples, are also proving quite successful.<sup>38</sup> Mediation has also been used with some success in post-conflict situations, for example by NGOs like Conciliation Resources in countries like Sierra Leone. In some parts of the continent neo-traditional solutions are also being used to try and reconcile people after the most serious conflicts, as with the *Gacaca* courts in Rwanda, and *Mato Oput* in Northern Uganda. Of course none of these initiatives provide perfect solutions to conflicts that are extremely grave, and the latter two in particular remain extremely controversial (Allen, 2006; Baines, 2007; Branch, 2004; Longman and Rutagengwa, 2004; Waldorf, 2006).

Moving from law to economics, it has become fashionable in recent years to speak of different models of capitalism: an Anglo-American model, a Scandinavian model, an East-Asian model.<sup>39</sup> But are there any indications of what an African model would look like? Some important literature has pointed to the dynamism of the African informal sector (see for example MacGaffey, 1987), while other seminal work has pointed to the constraints posed on indigenous capitalism by the need to squander investible surpluses on winning popular support (symbolic capital) in a context of communal and insecure property rights (Berry, 1985, 1993). Indeed, property rights, especially in land, remain an area of great difficulty and contention in Africa (Berry, 2002; Boone, 2007). There have also been debates about social capital.<sup>40</sup> In a particularly interesting and controversial contribution entitled 'The social capital of the felonious state', J-F Bayart et al argue that the flexible networks of Ibo extended families have provided Nigerian businesses a comparative advantage in the world of global drug trafficking (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, 1999).<sup>41</sup> The question for us is not whether or not the authors have slandered Nigerians, but whether the identifiable advantages of the African extended family in this context can be put to better developmental use in others. Strong yet flexible solidarity is surely a trait that could be used to advantage in a variety of more licit business environments. One example is the use of family networks in the transnational second

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<sup>36</sup> SULEDO is a community forestry project in Kiteto District Tanzania, which recently won a UN conservation prize of some \$30 000. Interestingly, the communities running the project chose to spend the prize money on two things: one, holding a big feast and celebration, and two, giving cash gifts to members of the district administration! Tanzania Scoping Exercise, February-March 2008.

<sup>37</sup> I thank Richard Crook for this point. See also Crook (2005).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, plus Tanzania Scoping Exercise. Manor (2008: 28) notes the success of the Ugandan case.

<sup>39</sup> Note that Manor expresses scepticism over the existence of the latter (2008: 2).

<sup>40</sup> A classic reference is Narayan and Pritchett (1997).

<sup>41</sup> For a critique, see Meagher (2006).

hand car trade (Beuving 2006). Can such networks, or merely the ideology of the extended family, be used in enterprises that are more productive still?

It is well worth remembering that industrial capitalism in the West tended to begin, and in some cases remains, a family enterprise, and we should not expect Africa to be too different. However, in the West the emergence of capitalism was at the same time intimately linked to the gradual sloughing off of extended family members. Indeed, it is the very weakness of the Western extended family that makes it comparatively easy for Westerners to separate out the spheres of their private and professional lives, to resist temptations to nepotism, corruption, embezzlement and so on. Demographic change may be pushing Africa in the same direction, but it is not there yet. One example is that businesses in Africa often find that when they pay high salaries, one effect is to increase the demands of an employee's extended family dependents.<sup>42</sup> Workers in the well-funded NGO sector in post-war Sierra Leone, for example, were inundated by demands from less fortunate relatives, demands which were difficult to ignore.<sup>43</sup> Consequently increased wages do not always reduce the incentives to mix up the public and private spheres, in short, to corruption. While it is true that petty corruption in Africa is partly the result of inadequate wages, it does not follow, in an extended family context, that increased wages will necessarily reduce the incentives to corruption. One solution might be to improve job performance not by means of higher wages (which nevertheless have to meet a minimum threshold), but by means of perks and allowances. Transport to and from work, a staff canteen, smart uniforms, and so on can significantly improve the esprit de corps of an organisation and consequently its performance.<sup>44</sup> Another option might be to pay a dependents' allowance on top of individual salaries. By making this a fixed amount, or even by naming the dependents, this might provide an instrument whereby employees could both recognise but also begin to limit their extended family obligations. Whatever the solutions, it seems clear that human resource management in Africa can only be successful if it is cognisant of the extended family context in which most people reside.<sup>45</sup>

Acknowledging the importance of the extended family is the inspiration for my last and probably most controversial point. Following Chabal and Daloz we might argue that the atomised individual underpinning much of Western political and social theory has little currency in Africa. Many Africans do not first and foremost think of themselves as individuals; they think of themselves as members of limited extended families (extended families that may extend before birth and after death).<sup>46</sup> Beyond that they identify, in concentric circles of weakening moral obligation, with wider extended families, clans, ethnic groups, and only then, if at all, with the nation state (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 49-63). Yet it is striking that almost all governmental service provision in Africa is directed either towards individuals, or at particular territorial units. But how can the individual citizen stand up for his entitlements when the idea of the individual has so little currency? How can service providers feel any sense of obligation to people to whom they are not related, or to areas from where they do not come?

State institutions are designed to supply universal goods accessible to all, but in reality this rarely occurs. The public services in many African countries are informally structured, as we

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<sup>42</sup> Tanzania Scoping Exercise.

<sup>43</sup> This was something I came to realise when conducting fieldwork on the subject of transitional justice in Sierra Leone, 2003-2006.

<sup>44</sup> I realised this when speaking to Justice Stephen Bwana who ran Tanzania's Commercial Court, regarded continentally as a model of efficiency and success.

<sup>45</sup> As Hyden has written, 'Any corporation that wants to succeed in Africa has to learn how to live with informal institutions, not just by condemning them but by accommodating them in ways that are compatible with their corporate objectives', citing oil companies and community development initiatives as an example (Hyden, 2008: 25).

<sup>46</sup> Compare anthropologist Charles Piot: 'Persons [in West Africa] do not "have" relations; they "are" relations' (1999: 18).

might expect, by the forces of familial and ethnic obligation. According to the logic of what Goran Hyden has called 'the economy of affection' (Hyden, 1983; Hyden, 2006), it is pointless in some African countries to try to secure state services unless one has a relative, or at least a member of one's ethnic group on the inside. Services are rendered as entitlements owed on the basis of kinship. The problem with this is that where people lack relatives in official agencies, their entitlements fail. In this case, friends or fictive relatives have to be bought, usually for a fee. Failing that services are supplied as favours at the caprice of the people in charge (the best data on what is admittedly a complex and multi-layered process can be found in Olivier de Sardan et al., 2006).

If informally African administrations function along kin lines, would it not be better to formalise this situation? Is it impossible to imagine, at least for some services, multi-functional ministries of ethnic affairs, in which service providers and recipients would be tied together by bonds of solidarity stronger than hitherto? As Lonsdale has observed generally, the 'conversion of political calculation into norms of accountability, this moral alchemy, seems the more probable where there is some kinship, however imaginary, between rulers and ruled' (Lonsdale, 1986: 131). Of course, the obstacles to such a reorganisation are formidable. Wouldn't these ministries, because multi-functional, begin to look like mini-states within the state? And what would happen if the performance of these different ethnic ministries varied considerably? What if some ethnic groups lacked qualified staff to man them? Would not some ethnic groups prosper while others were impoverished? How would resources be distributed to the ministries? Would it not create rivalry and jealousy? And what about countries with hundreds of small ethnic groups? What about people of mixed parentage? What about people living in extremely diverse urban areas? What about the cost and disruption of reorganisation?<sup>47</sup>

In light of all of these perfectly reasonable questions many people will doubtless dismiss this idea as utterly wild. But before dismissing it, it is worth considering the following tentative answers. Firstly, the idea of these ministries acting as mini-states within a state need not, when one thinks about it, be so disturbing. Isn't this what state and local governments are anyway? I am not suggesting that all functions, for example police, defence and foreign affairs be devolved to these ministries.

As for the differential performance of different ministries, this need not necessarily be a bad thing. The prosperity of different ethnic groups in Africa already varies considerably, both because of resource endowments and access to power. If one ethnic group found that its ministry performed consistently poorly, this would be an incentive for it to try to put things straight. It might re-inject some of the competition, diffusion, and imitation that characterised the political development of pre-colonial states, only without the violence. If certain ethnic groups lacked trained manpower, this would become obvious, and national programmes might be designed to rectify the imbalance. As well as being able to raise their own resources, ministries could receive disbursements from the central state, using donor or excise revenues, for example. Transfers could be made to different ethnic ministries on an equal per capita basis. The process would be transparent and would help mitigate some of the jealousy and rivalry that naturally attaches to these distributions when they are informal and opaque. In

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<sup>47</sup> Note that Mushtaq Khan has persuasively argued that clientelism is caused by the deep economic structures of developing countries. If he is correct, then governance reforms aimed at combating clientelism are unlikely to have much effect. Instead, the question of whether clientelism itself is productive for development turns on 'how the competition between factions affects the emergence of a capitalist sector, the acquisition of advanced technologies by that sector, and its ability to begin to compete in global markets. Historical examples show that a number of different patterns of patron-client competition are compatible with the rapid emergence of such a capitalist sector, while many other patterns ... ct as a brake on this sector' (Khan, 2005: 722). It is also worth remembering that there is nothing about patron-client relations that logically incline them to corruption or lack of transparency.

countries with hundreds of ethnic groups, some of them very small, closely related groups could be encouraged to combine. Ethnicity in the pre-colonial period was always fluid, indeed people's mobility was one of the strengths of the system. What's more, in the early colonial period there was considerable ethnic invention and innovation, as ethnic entrepreneurs positioned themselves to take advantage of the structures of indirect rule, in what was actually a remarkably peaceful process. The problem is that the structure has ossified since then. Hopefully, the architects of any new system based on ethnic governance would devise means that would permit ethnicity to be flexible, but not too flexible. For example, one might be able to apply to change one's ethnicity, maybe once every ten years. This would allow successful ethnicities to expand, while still maintaining an incentive for less successful ones to get their house in order. People of mixed parentage would need to plump for one ethnicity or the other, or else they could have their own 'mixed' ministry. Ethnic ministries might have their own branches in urban centres, or urban areas might retain a different system. It would not be a case of 'citizen and subject' as Mamdani has described for indirect rule: rather, it would be a case of 'ethnic citizen and urban citizen'.

The costs of disruption and re-organisation would potentially be extremely large. However, it is worth bearing in mind that ministries in many countries are practically moribund, so the costs may not be so great as one might initially think, and the pay-offs are potentially large. These proposals will sound unworkable to some people, and it is clear that there are presently no African countries that are ready for such a change, but the idea undoubtedly goes with the social grain of many places, in a way that current attempts to dynamize the public service via decentralisation and new public management do not.<sup>48</sup> In addition, it would probably be far less disruptive than other solutions to African governance political scientists have proposed, such as permitting national state boundaries to dissolve and reform (Englebert, 2000; Herbst, 2000).

## 5 Caveats and conclusions

Up to this point I have written about the grain of the African social fabric as though it were made up of family (of a largely patriarchal nature), religion, and ethnicity, and I have traced this to elements of Africa's pre-colonial past. However, these are not the only significant features on the African social landscape, and it is possible to argue that in some places at least, the economic foundations for these patterns are eroding. They are based, after all, in a lineage mode of production in which basic decisions about allocating land and labour, about propitiating ancestors and nature spirits, and about going to war were made predominantly by older men. All over the continent the remnants of this system – with the possible exception of going to war – remain visible. However, demographic changes are making them gradually disappear (for an overview see Berry, 2002). In a context of land shortage and population explosion, as well as the erosion in the prices of some traditionally 'male' crops, the lineage mode of production is becoming more difficult to sustain. There is no longer free land to allocate to dependents, the institution of bridewealth is being rendered untenable. Young women and men are less reliant on older men to give them a start economically, and the former's authority is waning in consequence. In addition, traditional religion, having to some extent retained its relevance alongside the growth of established Christianity and Islam, is now facing competition from a new wave of charismatic mosques and churches, which in some cases are less tolerant of traditional belief. The effect of this on Africans' overall worldview is at present difficult to discern, but it is likely to be another factor weakening Schatzberg's 'moral matrix'. Africa is becoming increasingly urbanised, another factor which tends to weaken the patriarchal tradition, even if neo-tradition often arises in its place.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Compare Hyden (2008: 43).

<sup>49</sup> This is a point usefully made by Hyden (2008).

Into this mix have come new ideas about democracy, human rights, women's rights, good governance and the like.<sup>50</sup> In accordance with Bayart's 'logic of appropriation', the latter have their converts, even if concepts such as democracy and human rights are usually imbibed with an African twist (see Karlstrom, 1996; Schaffer, 1998). Similarly, African governments and universities now contain individuals who are thoroughly committed to ideas like good governance and human rights, and in some countries they are making painstaking progress in turning their governments around.<sup>51</sup> One could certainly make an argument to suggest that the grain of African social formations is, under a variety of influences, undergoing a profound change; indeed that Africa may be about to make the kind of demographic transition that occurred in Europe in the early modern period, and that appears to have occurred recently in parts of Asia, or even that it is making a transition of the type we have not previously witnessed, and that we should expect novel and *sui generis* norms to arise as a result.<sup>52</sup> Would it not be counterproductive to encourage a return to some earlier, pre-modern grain?<sup>53</sup>

We do not yet know the answer to this question. But one way of answering it is systematically to study the characteristics of institutions that appear to be comparatively successful in solving collective action problems and providing public goods. Are these institutions based around, or do they at least try to accommodate African extended families, either structurally or ideologically? Do they have a religious component broadly conceived, in other words do they refer to some other-worldly dimension of accountability? Do they capitalise on clientelism and rule-flexibility? Are they held together by ethnic sentiment and (neo-)tradition? Alternatively, do successful institutions in Africa function by isolating individuals from the demands of their families, and if so how do they manage that? Do they stress secularism and instrumental rationality? Do they follow rules? Do they deliberately try to mitigate ethnic cleavages? In short, do successful institutions in Africa work with the grain of traditional society, or do they work against it? Is the answer different for different countries? Or in different sectors? Are there hitherto unrecognised blends? All of these questions need to be answered before we can know whether there is anything of value to the idea that development in Africa will be accelerated by going with the grain, or, more specifically what forms of going with the grain should be encouraged.<sup>54</sup> Hopefully, the search for answers will yield insights into the problematics of African development that have never been considered before.

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<sup>50</sup> In some cases, this has led to the rediscovery of submerged currents in African history, such as in the case of women being able to inherit land in certain parts of pre-colonial Tanzania, a right which is enshrined in the country's most recent land law. See Yngstrom (2002). This point, for which I thank Renata Serra, provides more support to the idea that the grain in Africa is changing and contestable.

<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere I myself have made the argument that there is not a unidirectional grain to African society. Rather, people are constructed in the interplay of different and often conflicting social currents, giving rise to complex and sometimes self-contradictory subjectivities, all of which make concerted action in any particular direction difficult to achieve (Kelsall, 2004). Carola Lentz, in her analysis of big men in contemporary Ghana, urges something similar when, critiquing Schatzberg, she argues that legitimacy should be thought of not as a matrix but as a plural and contested process (Lentz, 1998). See also Durham (2002)

<sup>52</sup> See Manor (2008: 3-6).

<sup>53</sup> In addition, some readers will doubtless think that anything that strengthens institutions that are fundamentally patriarchal can only be seen as anti-developmental, whatever the effects on service provision and economic growth.

<sup>54</sup> James Manor has usefully made the point that 'going with the grain' does not necessarily imply a return to 'older' modes of accountability. It is possible, as in India, that new more 'genuine' forms of accountability that also go with the grain may emerge (2008: 3-9).

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